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ABSTRACT

A program in Quincy, Massachusetts, is designed to teach nonhandicapped fourth grade students to understand what it is like to have a handicap. The six 45-minute units include an introductory puppet presentation as well as units on physical disabilities, mental retardation, learning disabilities, visual handicaps, and deafness. Puppets provide interest and a common introductory experience for the students. A curriculum that accompanies the units lists cognitive and affective objectives along with information on materials and sequencing of the lesson. Pre- and posttests were developed as a modification of the Attitudes Toward Handicapped Individuals scale. The program employs specialists (such as therapists and teachers of the mentally retarded and visually handicapped). Of the 119 students who participated in the program, 60 percent improved their posttest scores. (CL)

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UNDERSTANDING HANDICAPS: CHANGING STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE DISABLED

by

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With the passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Act, all handicapped children between the ages of 3 and 21 were guaranteed the right to a free and appropriate education in as normal an environment as possible. Since 1977, an increasing number of handicapped children have been placed in the same school environment as regular education students. This principle of placement in the least restrictive environment has come to be known as mainstreaming.

With mainstreaming, teachers, regular education students, and handicapped students, have come together--often for the first time--and they are often somewhat wary and frightened of each other. Initially, inservice and supervisory activities were focussed upon helping the teachers to develop new teaching skills and strategies to accommodate handicapped children within their classes. It soon became evident, however, that a critical and determining variable in the handicapped child's success in regular education was the acceptance, support, and understanding he or she received from non-handicapped classmates.

To encourage and support the concept of mainstreaming many school systems have initiated programs, courses, and interventions designed to help non-handicapped elementary students understand and appreciate the special needs and problems of the handicapped. [2,3,4,6,8,9,10,11] Many of these efforts grew out of a model program developed by the Meeting Street School in Providence, Rhode Island.[3] There a curriculum was developed for students in

grades 1 to 4 to help them come to understand what it means to be handicapped. "The curriculum has one central theme: When ordinary children understand the causes, visible effects and consequences of disabilities, they will try to treat disabled children as they would anyone else".

Insofar as possible, the Quincy Public School system is committed to meet the special educational needs of all its students within the mainstream. As handicapped children cannot succeed within the mainstream without the help and support of other students, Quincy has created a program designed to help children to increase their awareness of handicapped people and to make them feel more comfortable in reaching out to students with handicaps.

How The Program Evolved

In the fall of 1980, officers of the local Volunteer Information Agency (VIA) which assists parents of children with special needs, met with members of the Department of Pupil Personnel Services to develop a program on understanding handicaps to be presented to fourth grade students. VIA provided information about a program in the Newton Public Schools[4] which made extensive use of the Meeting Street School Program.[3] This work served as an aid in the development of the Quincy Program. School staff accepted responsibility for developing the curriculum and VIA accepted responsibility for making available materials including films, puppets, wheelchairs, prostheses, and crutches.

The program was begun in 1981, as part of the recognition of 1981 as the International Year of the Disabled Person. Now into its third year, the program continues, with a continued collaborative effort between the school system and VIA. Members from VIA participate in each presentation, and their continued support has been invaluable.

Quincy Public Schools Program

The Quincy Understanding Handicaps Program[5] is a series of six forty-five minute teaching units which can be presented to a classroom of students on six different days. The six units are entitled: Introductory Puppet Presentation, Physical Disabilities, Mental Retardation, Learning Disabilities, Visual Handicaps, and Deafness. The uniqueness of the Quincy program can be attributed to four factors: the introductory puppet presentation, the curriculum outline, the pre and post-test measures, and the use of staff specialists.

VIA supplied the "Kids on the Block"[1] puppets which were used in the introductory session and trained volunteers put on the skits. The "Kids on the Block" are six beautifully handcrafted puppets which are almost life-sized. Some of the puppets are handicapped in ways which are readily obvious: Mark is confined to a wheelchair; Renaldo is blind; Mandy is deaf and "speaks" with her hands. Others are "normal" children whose small disabilities (myopia, weight problems) serve to help bridge the initial gap between those puppets with handicaps and the non-handicapped students in the class. All the puppets have distinct personalities and very human character traits.

The use of the puppets was an ideal way to elicit enthusiasm for the program from children and to give all students a common experience from which to begin the program. The students asked the puppets questions, held them and observed their handicaps, and in later sessions, often referred to puppets by individual names in their discussions.

Another significant aspect of the Quincy program is the use of a written curriculum. The curriculum is consistent in its organization - each session begins with cognitive and affective objectives which students are expected to achieve during both sessions. Included next are the materials required for each unit and the exact sequence of activities the presenter would introduce to the students.

Using the Visual Handicaps unit as an example, one cognitive objective reads, "The student will observe the ways in which visually handicapped people manage school work, eating, daily living skills and independent travel". One affective objective reads, "The student will understand that a visually handicapped person has the same likes and dislikes as other people even though he/she has different vision". The materials used by the presenter include: wax paper masks, paper towel tubes, canes, Braille cards, magnifier, stylus and slate, large print book, braille writer, and the 16mm film "What Do You Do When You Meet A Blind Person?". The activities begin with an introduction to three types of vision problems (tunnel vision, low vision, blindness) with a simulated student activity using masks or paper towel tubes for each type of blindness. The students then examine actual adapted materials which will help a person with each type of vision problem. The film is shown to illustrate concrete examples of ways in which one can help a blind person on the street, in a restaurant, etc. Students then practice the "Help Walk" in pairs with one student acting as the blind person and the other as the helper. They discuss the daily living skills which have to be altered by a visually handicapped person such as pouring liquids, counting money, labeling food containers; and they note ways in which they could help a student with a vision problem if he/she were in their classroom.

The classroom teacher is given a copy of the curriculum so that he/she can help students to be prepared for each session and can conduct follow-up activities after the sessions. The curriculum also ensures that the program remains consistent - i.e., that the presenter utilizes the same activities in the same way each time. This gives validity to the pre and post-test results.

The pre and post-test instrument was developed by the two senior authors in relation to the objectives set for each session. It consists of 14 questions designed to tap students' positive and negative attitudes towards handicapped persons. The instrument is a modified version of the ATHI (Attitude Toward Handicapped Individuals) scale,[7] a scale of attitudes of acceptance or rejection. The items were read aloud to students who marked their responses on a continuum from "agree a lot" to "disagree a lot" concerning their feelings about playing with, being with, and interacting with the handicapped. For example, one item states, "It would be fun to have a handicapped person over to my house".

The pre-test is given to children before session one is begun, and the post-test is administered after all of the sessions have been completed. Children are encouraged to give their own responses, and they are told that there is no right or wrong answer for each item.

Finally, Quincy utilized staff members, including physical therapist, occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, and teachers of the mentally retarded and the visually handicapped. These staff members work daily with the handicapped youngsters about whom they are talking as the session presenters. These people know first-hand the needs and concerns, as well as the strengths and talents, of these children and can have accurate and sensitive answers to the questions students will ask. They

serve naturally as the advocates for these handicapped children, and they gain the opportunity to share with others the information which they learn daily from their handicapped students.

Results

A total of 119 students in grades 4 and 5 participated in the program and completed both the pre and post-questionnaire. Of these 119 students, 71 or 60% improved their scores. Among those students whose scores did not improve was a large number of students with exceptionally high scores on the pre-test. These scores left them little room for improvement as a result of their participation in the program. For example, a few students obtained the maximum positive score possible on the pre-test, therefore making it impossible to show improvement on the post-testing. Conversely, the greatest over-all improvement in attitudes occurred in those students who scored very low on the pre-test. In one such situation, 15 of the 17 students in the class showed marked increases in their positive attitudes toward the handicapped following participation in this program.

Suggestions for Other Communities

The Quincy Understanding Handicaps program has relevance for any school or school system interested in mainstreaming handicapped children and sensitizing children to the needs of the handicapped. The objectives of the program are general, and the result can be youngsters who will be more sensitive to the handicapped as they become older children and adults.

From this experience, suggestions are offered which can be useful to other groups interested in initiating such a program.

1. Use some staff members from your school department rather than all volunteers. As a result, the curriculum and the actual presentations will be responsible in a direct supervisory manner to school administrative staff.
2. Utilize staff members who have actually taught in a classroom, or give some suggestions on management of a large group of children before the sessions begin.
3. A written curriculum is vital so that the classroom teacher can provide follow-up to the program after each session has been completed.
4. A pre and post-test instrument is absolutely necessary in order to measure whether or not the objectives have been achieved by children and if the program has made a significant difference.
5. Use enough hands-on activities to help children to experience the handicap. Remember, however, that too many activities will lead children to see the sessions as games and to forget the the purpose of the lessons.
6. Teachers and schools should volunteer to be part of the program. Staff members agree that it is the commitment of the involved classroom teacher which makes the difference.

Summary

The findings of this study indicate that exposing young students to programs such as this appears to make a difference, at least in the short run, in their attitudes towards the handicapped. (A long-term follow-up survey would be necessary to determine whether or not these positive attitudes remain over a long period of time.) Finding that programs such as this can increase students' positive attitudes toward the handicapped is important for school systems committed to the concept of mainstreaming.

In addition to the pre and post-test measure of the value of the program, feed-back from teachers, principals and parents has been overwhelmingly positive. Parents have reported their children's discussions of handicaps at home and their increased comfort in reaching out to handicapped persons in the neighborhood. One teacher who had hosted the program wrote, "I feel the children learned a great deal. They enjoyed the guest speakers and still talk about them. Several of our students wrote articles about the program for our school newsletter". Students in another class wrote brief essays on what it would be like to have a handicap. One fourth grade girl put the program in perspective when she wrote:

> "If I had one hand it would be very hard to write in school. I might need something to hold my paper down for me. I would like someone at supper to put my fork, spoon, and knife all on one side of my plate. But, most of all, I would like for everybody to act as if I had two hands".

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